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V.

THE ENGLISH ARISTOCRACY.*

THE eminently popular character of the English aristocracy is of a very early date, and it has probably done more than any other single cause to determine the type and insure the permanence of English freedom. The position of the Norman nobility in England had always been widely different from that of the same nobility at home, William being able to withhold in the one case important privileges he was compelled to recognize in the other; and a long conflict, in which the nobles, in alliance with the Commons, were struggling against the power of the monarchy, contributed, with other causes, to give a popular bias to the former. The great charter had been won by the barons, but, instead of being confined to a demand for new aristocratical privileges, it guaranteed the legal rights of all freemen, and the ancient customs and liberties of cities, prohibited every kind of arbitrary punishment, compelled the barons to grant their subvassals mitigations of feudal burdens similar to those which they themselves obtained from the king, and even accorded special protection to foreign merchants in England. Philip de Comines had noticed, as a remarkable fact, the singular humanity of the nobles to the people during the civil wars. In these wars the nobility were almost annihilated, and as they were but little increased during the reign of Henry VII., the revival of the order in numbers and wealth dates, in a great measure, from the innovating and liberal movement of the Reformation. The Puritan rebellion was chiefly democratic, but the Revolution of 1688 was

* From advance sheets of a "History of England in the Eighteenth Century," now in the press of D. Appleton & Co.

chiefly aristocratic; and while the reforms of the former were soon swept away, and its excesses followed by a long reaction toward despotism, the latter founded on a secure basis the liberties of England. Although Stuart creations had raised the temporal peerage from 59 to about 150—although the introduction of Scotch peers at the Union, and the simultaneous creation of twelve Tory peers by Harley, had impaired the liberalism of the Upper House—still, from the time of the revolution to the reign of George III., the Whig party almost always preponderated in it, and contained the families of the greatest influence and dignity. The House of Lords threw its shelter successively over Somers and Walpole when the House of Commons was ready to sacrifice them. By its strenuous opposition to the encroachments of the House of Commons, it secured for electors in 1704 the all-important right of defending a disputed qualification before an impartial legal tribunal. It delayed or mitigated the persecuting legislation directed under Anne against the Dissenters. It steadily upheld the Protestant succession at the period of its greatest peril, and, during the long Whig rule of Walpole and the Pelhams, it not only gave the Government a secure majority in one House, but also, by the influence of the peers over the small boroughs, contributed very largely to the majority in the other.

The causes of the liberal tendencies that have so broadly distinguished the English nobility from those of most other countries are to be found not only in the traditions of its early history, but also in the constitution of the order. In most Continental countries an aristocracy has a tendency to become an isolated and, at length, an enervated caste, removed from the sympathies and occupations, and opposed to the interests, of the community at large, despising, and therefore discrediting, all active occupations except those of a soldier, and thus connecting in the minds of men the idea of social rank with that of an idle and frivolous life. But in England the interests of the nobles, as a class, have been carefully and indissolubly interwoven with those of the people. They have never claimed for themselves any immunity from taxation. Their sons, except the eldest, have descended, after one or two generations, into the ranks of the commoners. Their eldest sons, before obtaining their titles, have usually made

it a great object of their ambition to sit in the House of Commons, and have there acquired the tastes of popular politics. In the public-school system the peers and the lower gentry are united in the closest ties. The intermarriage of peers and commoners has always been legal and common. A constant stream of lawyers of brilliant talents, but often of humble birth, has poured into the Upper House, which is presided over by one of them; and the purely hereditary character of the body has been still further qualified by the introduction of the bishops.

Not less distinctive and remarkable is the influence which the aristocracy in England has exercised on the estimate of labor. One of the chief ends of the whole social organization is to develop, to the highest point, and apply to the greatest advantage, the sum of talent existing in the community. In its first rudimentary stage, government accomplishes this end chiefly in a negative way, by discharging those police functions without which there can be no peaceful labor; but, with the increased elaboration of society, it becomes apparent that the Legislature can, in two distinct ways, directly and very powerfully assist the development. The first of these ways is by supplying opportunities for the exercise of talent which would otherwise be lost. There is at every period, latent among poor men, a large amount of special talent of the highest value, which cannot be elicited without a long and expensive process of cultivation, or which, when elicited, is of a kind that would produce no pecuniary results at all commensurate with its importance, and which would, therefore, in the natural course of things, either remain wholly uncultivated, or be diverted to lower but more lucrative channels. It is one of the most useful functions of government to provide means by which poor men, who exhibit some special aptitude, may be brought within the reach of an appropriate education; and it is one of the most important advantages of many institutions that they supply requisite spheres for the expansion of certain casts of intellect, and adequate rewards for pursuits which are of great value to the community, but which, if left to the unassisted operation of the law of supply and demand, would remain wholly, or in a great degree, unremunerative.

If much talent is wasted on account of opportunities, much also is unemployed for want of incentives. It is not a natural

or, in most countries, a common thing for those large classes who possess all the means of enjoyment and luxury, who have the world before them to choose from, and who have never known the pressure of want or of necessity, to devote themselves to long, painful, and plodding drudgery, to incur all the responsibilities, anxiety, calumny, ingratitude, and bondage, of public life. If, in the case of men of extraordinary ability, the path of ambition may be itself sufficiently attractive, it is not naturally so to rich men of little more than average talent. On the other hand, the forms of useful labor which are unremunerative to the laborer are so numerous, the force of the example of the higher classes is so great, the advantages of independent circumstances for the prosecution of many kinds of labor are so inestimable, and, in public life especially, such circumstances assist men so powerfully in resisting the most fatal temptations, that the existence of laborious tastes and habits among the richer classes is of the utmost value to the community. The legislation which can produce them will not only add directly to the amount of talent, but will also set the whole current of society aright, and generate in the higher classes a moral influence that sooner or later will permeate all.

The indissoluble connection of the enjoyment and the dignity of property with the discharge of public duties was the pre-eminent merit of feudalism, and it is one of the special excellences of English institutions that they have in a great measure preserved this connection, notwithstanding the necessary dissolution of the feudal system. This achievement has been the result of more than one agency, and of the accumulated traditions of many generations. The formation of an unpaid magistracy, and the great governing duties thrown upon the House of Lords, combined with the vast territorial possessions and the country tastes of the upper classes, have made the gratuitous discharge of judicial, legislative, and administrative functions the natural accompaniment of a considerable social position, while the retrospective habits which an aristocracy creates perpetuate and intensify the feelings of an honorable ambition. The memory of great ancestors, and the desire not to suffer a great name to fade, become an incentive of the most powerful kind. A point of honor conducive to exertion is created, and men learn to asso-

ciate the idea of active patriotic labor with that of the social condition they deem most desirable. A body of men is thus formed who, with circumstances peculiarly favorable for the successful prosecution of important unremunerative labors, combine dispositions and habits eminently laborious, and who have at the same time an unrivaled power of infusing by their example a love of labor into the whole community.

The importance of the influence thus exercised will scarcely, I think, be overlooked by those who will remember, on the one hand, how many great nations and how many long periods have been almost destitute of developed talent, and, on the other hand, how very little evidence we have of the existence of any great difference in respect to innate ability between different nations or ages. The amount of realized talent in a community depends mainly on the circumstances in which it is placed, and, above all, upon the disposition that animates it. It depends upon the force and direction that have been given to its energies, upon the nature of its ambitions, upon its conception and standard of dignity. In all large classes who have great opportunities, and, at the same time, great temptations, there will be innumerable examples of men who neglect the former and yield to the latter; but it can hardly, I think, be denied that in no other country has so large an amount of salutary labor been gratuitously accomplished by the upper classes as in England; and in the present day, at least, aristocratic influence in English legislation is chiefly to be traced in the number of offices that are either not at all or insufficiently paid. The impulse which was first given in the sphere of public life has gradually extended through many others, and in addition to many statesmen, orators, or soldiers—in addition to many men who have exhibited an admirable administrative skill in the management of vast properties and the improvement of numerous dependents—the English aristocracy has been extremely rich in men who, as poets, historians, art-critics, linguists, philologists, antiquaries, or men of science, have attained a great or at least a respectable eminence. The peers in England have been specially connected with two classes. They are the natural representatives of the whole body of country gentlemen, while, from their great wealth and their town lives, they are intimately connected with that important and rapidly-

increasing class who have amassed or inherited large fortunes from commerce or manufactures, whose politics during the early Hanoverian period they steadily represented. It will be found, I think, that the House of Lords, even when most Tory, has been more liberal than the first class, and has produced, in proportion to its numbers, more political talent than the latter.

In this manner it appears that the existence of a powerful aristocracy, and the political functions with which it is invested, cannot be regarded as isolated facts. They are connected with that whole condition of society which in England has always thrown on the upper classes the chief political leadership of the country, and as such they open out questions of the gravest kind. No maxim in politics is more certain than that, whenever a single class possesses a monopoly or an overwhelming preponderance of power, it will end by abusing it. Whatever may be the end of morals, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" is undoubtedly the rule of politics, and a system of government which throws all power into the hands of one class, of the smallest class, and of the richest class, is assuredly not calculated to promote it. But it is one thing to give a class a monopoly of political power; it is quite another thing to intrust it, under the restrictions of a really popular government, with the chief share of active administration. A structure of society like that of England, which brings the upper class into such political prominence that they usually furnish the popular candidates for election, has at least the advantage of saving the nation from that government by speculators, adventurers, and demagogues, which is the gravest of all the evils to which representative institutions are liable. When the suffrage is widely extended, a large proportion of electors will always be wholly destitute of political convictions, while every artifice is employed to mislead them. Under such circumstances it is very possible—in many countries it is even very probable—that the supreme management of affairs may pass into the hands of men who are perfectly unprincipled, who seek only for personal aggrandizement or personal notoriety, who have no real stake in the country, and who are perfectly reckless of its future and its permanent interests. It would be difficult to exaggerate the dangers that may result from even a short period of such rule,

and they have often driven nations to take refuge from their own representatives in the arms of despotism. The disposal of the national revenue may pass into the hands of mere swindlers, and become the prey of simple malversation. The foreign policy of the country may be directed by men who seek only for notoriety or for the consolidation of their tottering power, and who with these views plunge the nation into wars that lead speedily to national ruin. In home politics institutions which are lost in the twilight of a distant past may, through similar motives, in a few months be recklessly destroyed. Nearly all great institutions are the growth of centuries; their first rise is slow, obscure, undemonstrative, they have been again and again modified, recast, and expanded; their founders leave no reputation, and reap no harvest from their exertions. On the other hand, the destruction of a great and ancient institution is an eminently dramatic thing, and no other political achievement usually produces so much noisy reputation in proportion to the ability it requires. The catastrophe (however long preparing) is concentrated in a short time, and the name of the man who effects it is immortalized. As a great writer * has finely said, "When the oak is felled, the whole forest echoes with its fall, but a hundred acorns are sown in silence by an unnoticed breeze." Hence to minds ambitious only of notoriety, careless of the permanent interests of the nation, and destitute of all real feeling of political responsibility, a policy of mere destruction possesses an irresistible attraction.

From these extreme evils a country is for the most part saved by intrusting the management of its affairs chiefly to the upper classes of the community. A government of gentlemen may be and often is extremely deficient in intelligence, in energy, in sympathy with the poorer classes. It may be shamefully biased by class interests, and guilty of great corruption in the disposal of patronage, but the standard of honor common to the class at least secures it from the grosser forms of malversation, and the interests of its members are indissolubly connected with the permanent well-being of the country. Such men may be guilty of much misgovernment, and they will certainly, if uncontrolled by

* Carlyle.

other classes, display much selfishness, but it is scarcely possible that they should be wholly indifferent to the ultimate consequences of their acts, or should divest themselves of all sense of responsibility or public duty. When other things are equal, the class which has most to lose and least to gain by dishonesty will exhibit the highest level of integrity. When other things are equal, the class whose interests are most permanently and seriously bound up with those of the nation is likely to be the most careful guardian of the national welfare. When other things are equal, the class which has most leisure and most means of instruction will, as a whole, be the most intelligent. Besides this, the tact, the refinement, the reticence, the conciliatory tone of thought and manner characteristic of gentlemen are all peculiarly valuable in public men, whose chief task is to reconcile conflicting pretensions and to harmonize jarring interests. Nor is it a matter of slight importance to the political life of a nation, or to the estimate in which a nation is held by its neighbors, that its government should be in the hands of men on whom no class can look down. Rightly or wrongly, nations are judged mainly by their politicians and by their political acts, and, when these have ceased to command respect, the character of a nation in the world is speedily lowered.

To these advantages, arising indirectly from the intervention of an hereditary aristocracy in government, others may be added. In the first place such an aristocracy exists, and, rightly or wrongly, attracts to itself among great multitudes of men a warm feeling of reverence and even of affection. It is the part of wise statesmen—and it is one of the characteristics by which such men are distinguished from crude theorists—to avail themselves for the purposes of government of all those strong, enduring, and unreasoning attachments which tradition, associations, or other causes, have generated. Such are, the sentiment of loyalty, the respect for religion, the homage paid to rank. These feelings endear government to the people, counteract any feeling of repulsion the sacrifices it exacts might produce, give it that permanence, security, and stability, which are essential to the well-being of society. Sometimes, no doubt, the reverential or conservative elements have an excessive force, and form an obstacle to progress ; but that they should exist, and under some form be

the basis of the national character, is the essential condition of all permanent good government. A state of society in which revolution is always imminent is disastrous alike to moral, political, and material interests, and it is much less a reasoning conviction than unreasoning sentiments of attachment that enable governments to bear the strain of occasional maladministration, revolutionary panics, and seasons of calamity.*

These considerations may be carried a step further. All civic virtue, all the heroism and self-sacrifice of patriotism, spring ultimately from the habit men acquire of regarding their nation as a great organic whole, identifying themselves with its fortunes in the past as in the present, and looking forward anxiously to its future destinies. When the members of any nation have come to regard their country as nothing more than the plot of ground on which they reside, and their government as a mere organization for providing police or contracting treaties; when they have ceased to entertain any warmer feelings for one another than those which private interest, or personal friendship, or a mere general philanthropy, may produce, the moral dissolution of that nation is at hand. Even in the order of material interests the well-being of each generation is in a great degree dependent upon the forbearance, self-sacrifice, and providence, of those who have preceded it, and civic virtues can never flourish in a generation which thinks only of itself. "Those will not look forward to their posterity who never look backward to their ancestors." † To kindle and sustain the vital flame of national sentiment is the chief moral end of national institutions, and, while it cannot be denied that it has been attained under the most various forms of government, it is equally certain that an aristocracy which is at once popular and hereditary, which blends and assimilates itself with the general interests of the present, while it perpetuates and honors the memories of the past, is peculiarly fitted to foster it.

Another advantage which should not be neglected in a review of the effects of aristocratic institutions is their tendency to bring young men into active political life. In politics, as in most other professions, early training is of extreme importance, and in a

* See on this subject a noble passage, full of profound wisdom, in Lord Russell's "Essay on the English Constitution," pp. 271, 272.

† Burke.

country where government is conducted mainly through the instrumentality of Parliament, this training, to be really efficient, must include an early practice of parliamentary duties. A young man of energy and industry, possessing the tact and manners of good society, and endowed with abilities slightly superior to those of the average of men, is likely, if brought into parliamentary and official life between twenty and thirty, to acquire a skill in the conduct of public business rarely attained even by men of great genius whose minds and characters have been formed in other spheres, and who have come late into the arena of Parliament. The presence in Parliament of a certain number of young politicians, from whom the lower offices of administration may be filled, and who may gradually rise to the foremost places, is an essential condition of the well-being of constitutional government, and it is one of the conditions which, since the abolition of the nomination boroughs, it has become most difficult to attain. Popular election is in this respect exceedingly worthless. It may be trusted to create, with a rough but substantial justice, a representation of public opinion. It may be trusted, but much less perfectly, to secure some recognition of old services and of matured genius, but an extended constituency has neither the capacity nor the desire to discover undeveloped talent, or to recognize the promise of future excellence. Hardly any other feature of our parliamentary system appears so ominous, to a thoughtful observer as the growing exclusion of young men from the House of Commons, and, if a certain number are still found within its walls, this is mainly due to that aristocratic sentiment which makes the younger members of noble families the favorite candidates with many constituencies.

There are other consequences which it will be sufficient simply to enumerate. The existence of a powerful, independent, and connected class, carrying with it a dignity, and in many respects an influence, fully equal to that of the servants of the crown, has more than once proved the most formidable obstacle to the encroachments of despotism; while, on the other hand, in democratic times, this hierarchy of ranks serves to mitigate the isolation of the throne, and is thus a powerful bulwark to monarchy. A second chamber is so essential to the healthy working of constitutional government, that it may almost be pronounced

a political necessity; and in times when the position of that chamber is a secondary one, when its leading functions are merely to delay and to revise, it is no small advantage that it should be composed of men possessing, indeed, great local knowledge and influence, but at the same time independent of local intrigues and jealousies, and of the transient bursts of popular passion. A permanent hereditary chamber has at least a tendency to impart to national policy that character of continuity and stability, and to infuse into its discussions that judicial spirit, which it is most difficult to preserve amid the rapid fluctuations and the keen contests of popular government. It may even very materially contribute to make legislation a reflex of the popular will. No matter how perfect may be the system of election, an elected body can never represent with complete fidelity the political sentiments of the community. In particular constituencies purely local and personal considerations continually falsify the political verdict. In the country at large a general election usually turns on a single great party issue, or on the comparative popularity of rival statesmen, and hardly a year passes in which the politicians in whom, on the whole, the nation has most confidence do not act on some particular question in a manner opposed to the national sentiment. If the question is a subordinate one, this divergence does not make the country desire a change of ministry; and it is extremely difficult, under the system of party government, to enforce by any less violent means the national will. Under these circumstances, a body such as the House of Lords, exempt from the necessity of popular election, representing at the same time most of the forms of public opinion, and exercising in the constitution a kind of revising, judicial, and moderating office, is of great utility; it is able to arrest or retard a particular course of policy, without producing a ministerial crisis, and it may thus be said, without a paradox, to contribute to the representative character of the government. Besides this, the peerage enables the country to avail itself of the talents of statesmen of ability and experience, who are physically incapable of enduring the fatigue inseparable from the position of a minister in the Lower House; it forms a cheap yet highly-prized reward for great services to the nation or the crown; and it exercises in some respects a considerable refining influence upon the manners

of society by counteracting the empire of mere wealth, and sustaining that order of feelings and sentiments which constitutes the conception of a gentleman. Nor should we altogether disregard its minor uses in settling doubtful questions of precedence, and marking out the natural leaders for many movements, which would otherwise be weakened by conflicting claims and by personal jealousies.

There are, no doubt, serious drawbacks to these benefits. No human institution is either an unmitigated good or an unmitigated evil; and the main task of every statesman and of every sound political thinker is to weigh with impartiality the good and evil consequences that arise out of each. Considered abstractly, every institution is an evil which teaches men to estimate their fellows not according to their moral and intellectual worth, but by an unreal and factitious standard. The worship of baubles and fantasies necessarily perverts the moral judgment, nor can any one who is acquainted with English society doubt that in this respect the evil of aristocratic institutions is deeply felt in every grade. Their moral effects are, on the whole, more doubtful than their political effects, and the servile and sycophantic dispositions, the vulgarity of thought and feeling they tend to foster in the community, form the most serious counterpoise to their undoubted advantages. These evils, however, lie far too deep for mere political remedies; and when the worship of rank and the worship of wealth are in competition it may, at least, be said that the existence of the two idols diminishes by dividing the force of each superstition, and that the latter evil is an increasing one, while the former is never again likely to be a danger. The injurious effects of aristocratic influence may, however, be abundantly traced in the desire to aggregate the vast preponderance of family property in a single heir, which is often displayed in England to an extent that is an outrage upon morality; in the frequent spectacle of many children—often daughters, who are almost incapable of earning a livelihood—reduced to penury, in order that the eldest son may gratify the family vanity by an adequate display of ostentatious luxury; in the scandalous injustice of the law relating to intestacy. Although it would be an absurd exaggeration to attribute to the existence of an aristocracy the frightful contrast of extreme opulence and abject misery

which is so frequent in England, it is undoubtedly true that the excessive inequality of the distribution of wealth, resulting from laws which were originally intended to secure the preponderance of a class, and from manners which were originally the product of those laws, has most seriously aggravated it. The laws have for the most part passed away, but the habits that grew out of them remain, and they operate over a far larger circle than that of the aristocracy. Great as is the use of the peerage in sustaining public spirit in the nation, it is unquestionable that the passion for founding families which it produces diminishes largely the flow of private munificence to public objects, and its value in promoting laborious habits is in some degree counteracted by its manifest tendency to depress the purely intellectual classes. Rank is much less local in its influence than wealth, and wherever a powerful aristocracy exists, it overshadows intellectual eminence, and becomes its successful rival in most forms of national competition. The political advantages of an hereditary chamber are very great, but the power of unlimited veto resting in such a chamber is a grave anomaly in a free government. Nor is it one of those anomalies which are merely theoretical. On great questions on which popular passions are violently aroused, the spirit of compromise and political sagacity, so general among the upper classes in England, may usually be counted upon to prevent serious collisions; and the power of creating an unlimited number of peers provides in the last resort an extreme, dangerous, but efficient remedy. There are, however, many questions on which the national judgment is plainly pronounced, but which from their nature do not appeal to any strong passions, and on these the obstructive power of the House of Lords has sometimes proved very mischievous. More than one measure of reform has thus been rejected through several successive Parliaments, in spite of unbroken and repeated majorities in the Lower House.

Looking again at the question from a purely historical standing-point, it is certain that the politicians of the Upper House were deeply tainted with the treachery and duplicity common to most English statesmen between the Restoration and the American Revolution. Most of the bills for preventing corrupt influence in the Commons during the administration of Walpole were crushed by the influence of the minister in the House of Lords.

The country was long seriously burdened, and some of the professions were systematically degraded, in order to furnish lucrative posts for the younger members of the aristocratic families; and the representative character of the Lower House was so utterly perverted by the multiplication of nomination boroughs in the hands of the peers that a storm of indignation was at last raised which shook the very pillars of the constitution. Still, even in these respects, the English nobility form a marked contrast to those of the Continent. Though rank has in England almost always brought with it a very disproportionate weight, although it is undoubtedly true that in the last years of George II., and in the first years of George III., three or four aristocratic families threatened to control the efficient power in the State, yet, on the whole, no other aristocracy has shown itself so free from the spirit of monopoly. In the great Whig period, from the Revolution till the death of Walpole, there were numerous instances of statesmen who were not of noble birth taking a foremost place in English politics.* The names of Somers, Montague, Churchill, Addison, Craggs, and many others, will at once occur to the reader, and the most powerful leader of this age was a simple country gentleman, a member of the House of Commons, who was so far from allowing himself to be the puppet of any one, that one of the chief faults of his administration was his extreme reluctance to part with the smallest share of the influence of the Government. The steady support which the Whig House of Lords gave to Walpole, during every stage of his career, is a decisive proof not only of its enlightenment but also of its moderation. Nor is this less true of the opposite party. No Tory minister has had so absolute an authority as William Pitt; and, in the period of the darkest and most bigoted Toryism, the House of Lords was governed with an almost absolute sway by the knowledge and the ability of Eldon. If the nomination boroughs were perverted, as they undoubtedly were to a very large

* This has been noticed by Swift, in a very remarkable paper on the "Decline of the Political Influence of the Nobility," in the *Intelligencer*, No. 9. He declares that "for above sixty years past the chief conduct of affairs hath been generally placed in new men, with few exceptions." He ascribes this chiefly to the defective education of the upper classes. Swift was, I believe, wrong, in imagining that aristocratic influence had declined.

extent, to the most selfish purposes, it is also true that there was sufficient public spirit among their proprietors to induce them to bring into the House of Commons a far larger proportion of young men of promise and genius than have ever, under any other system, entered its walls. If the numerous Tory creations of George III. at last altered the spirit of the body, it should at least not be forgotten that the old tradition never was extinct, that in the great struggle of the Reform Bill some of the chief aristocratic borough-owners were among the foremost advocates of the people, and that the large majority of the peers of an older creation than George III. were on the same side,* while the most obstinate opponents of progress found their leaders in Eldon and Lyndhurst, who had but lately risen from the ranks.

W. E. H. LECKY.

* Molesworth's "History of England," vol. i., p. 203.